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ABSTRACT

To improve parent and citizen involvement in school closing decisions, this guidebook discusses the methods and requirements for effective participation. Chapter one covers the background of school closings and declining enrollment, including national demographic and lifestyle changes and their effects on schools and other institutions. Chapter two lists eight components of successful citizen involvement programs, including appropriate definition of the problem, establishment of priorities, widespread information-sharing and debate, and a cooperative, problem-solving spirit. Different methods of getting involved and various courses of action are described in chapter three, while chapter four notes eight topics, such as enrollment and finances, about which involved citizens will need credible information. The fifth chapter suggests 13 strategies to consider in handling enrollment decline and school closure. Among the suggestions are boundary shifts, curriculum changes, staff sharing, and school space sharing. Chapter six offers ways to ease the transition after a school closes. The summary chapter emphasizes eight key points, including the need for adequate time to involve the community and for school reuse plans. Two appendices provide questions citizens should ask about school property reuse and a list of national citizen-advocacy organizations in education. (RW)

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SCHOOL CLOSINGS AND DECLINING ENROLLMENT

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A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PARENT CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

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About the Publishers

Educational Facilities Laboratories
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The Educational Facilities Laboratories, a division of the Academy for Educational Development, is a nonprofit, research, public information and technical assistance organization which seeks to improve the capacity of those who plan, finance and manage public institutions to make more intelligent and creative decisions. EFL works in all areas of education, the arts, social and community services, and community development and often serves as a bridge between those who provide and those who use institutional services.

Since its inception in 1958, EFL has been involved in all aspects of school facilities and resource planning. One of six program areas currently undertaken by EFL, school planning helps local school districts respond to changing population patterns and facility needs in ways that best serve the entire school community. EFL advises local schools on planning processes which include active citizen involvement and has provided long-term assistance to district and citizen planning groups.

EFL has long been recognized as a leader in promoting planning for enrollment decline and for the early consideration of alternative use of school space. EFL's research and findings on planning processes and alternative uses have resulted in several technical assistance reports on the subject and a widely used Community Planning Assistance Kit, tested and refined in laboratories and workshops held in cooperation with the Council of Educational Facility Planners. At the same time, EFL continues to develop educational and facilities programs for renovation and new construction of elementary and secondary school buildings, both in the United States and overseas. Other EFL programs respond to such current challenges as conserving energy through more efficient building design and management, revitalizing neighborhoods and communities, responding to technological advances in communications and education, and providing for the growth of community arts and cultural activities.

For a description of the National Committee, see inside back cover.

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About the Author

Ellen Bussard is a project director at Educational Facilities Laboratories, a division of the Academy for Educational Development. EFL has been actively engaged in helping communities recognize and deal with declining enrollment since 1974. During the past three years, Ms. Bussard has spent hundreds of hours talking with parents, citizens, board members, and school district administrators about this issue and reviewing processes for making decisions about closing schools throughout the country.

In reviewing her extensive involvement in school closing struggles and decisions, Ms. Bussard comments that, "Regardless of how far apart citizens, board members, and administrators may be in their views of the problem, each is sincerely trying to do the best for the community. Nobody is trying to be the enemy, and nobody wants to be perceived as the enemy. Every person who gets involved in school closings and declining enrollment would do well to remember this."

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" The Board of Education has recently adopted plans for school closings through 1990. My children's elementary school has been one of their choices. Residents of this area are opposed to this plan. Our school is a downtown neighborhood school in the oldest part of the city. It is a naturally integrated, non-bused school. It is a strong source of unity and a focal point for a neighborhood which is trying to rebuild itself. If it closes, our children who now walk to one school will be divided among five other schools. Some will be bused, and others will have to cross railroad tracks and the river on their 1-1/2 mile walk to school. This will begin in kindergarten.

We feel committed to our school and to our integrated, open community. I would be interested to hear of any information you have of others involved in such issues—or how to affect such decisions. Thank you."

Introduction

Most citizens who get actively involved in school closings are those who feel directly affected. They may be parents with children in school, who are concerned about the welfare and education of their children. They may be neighbors who live near the school and who are concerned about the future of the neighborhood and the future use of the school building. Or they may be citizens concerned about increasing tax rates who seek to contain education expenditures.

Some citizens will be veteran school activists, and will be extremely knowledgeable about the workings of the school system. Others, who may not have felt directly affected by school district decisions before, will be participating for the first time.

Parents of children attending a school that may be closed and other neighbors of the school almost instinctively oppose the closing of "their" school. Their first impulse is to organize parents and neighbors to stop the closing, if possible, by lobbying the board of education, or by trying to unseat board members who voted in favor of closing, or by threatening to go to court. Although these are perfectly natural responses, they are not the most effective methods of participation and may have negative consequences in the long run.

A group consisting of only those who will be most directly affected tends to have a low level of credibility, perceived, as they are, to be fighting for their own narrow interests, probably at the expense of broader district interests. This perception is likely to be shared by the board of education, by other community residents, and by state officials and courts of law.

Very few school closing decisions have been overturned through administrative appeal to chief state school officers or through legal

appeal to state courts, the two available routes of appeal. Time and time again state administrators and courts have ruled that school boards have the right and responsibility to close schools as part of their responsibility to govern the district. In almost all cases, statistical evidence supports school closing as a legitimate response to declining enrollment. Most school boards abide by the requirements for receiving citizen comment and holding public hearings that constitute the extent of legally mandated "citizen involvement." So long as these two conditions are met, and the board has acted in good faith, appellate bodies generally do not rule on whether or not the proposed solution is the *best* one.

Membership of many a board of education has changed during community battles over school closing. However, new board members, elected or appointed on a platform to "save our schools," have often discovered that closing schools may be necessary. To their chagrin, and to the dismay of their supporters, they have often had to reverse their position and vote to close schools after they have become fully educated about the impact of declining enrollment in their school district.

"Success" in keeping one school open is a hollow victory, if not accompanied by other strategies for coping with fewer students. Few school boards succeed in closing schools until the impact of declining enrollment is being felt strongly throughout the district, they may be faulted for not making decisions earlier. Simply keeping a school open does not address the issues of declining enrollment. Most often, it means that another school will be closed whose parents and neighbors are not as politically well organized or powerful. This result can only introduce or increase already existing divisions among residents. Alternatively, the impact of declining enrollment will be felt in other ways: the board may fire more teachers and increase class sizes to a maximum; it may cut out all special programs and teaching positions; it may eliminate guidance counselors and

nurses; or it may stop purchasing new books, equipment, and supplies.

A group of citizens who successfully keep open a school slated for closing will probably also have established a hostile split between the school board and citizens, and between groups of citizens. If anything, the board is likely to react by trying to minimize real opportunities for citizen involvement in the future. It will keep its deliberations more private, attempt to withhold information, and make future school closing announcements close to the time of anticipated closing in order to reduce the chances of another school interest group getting sufficiently well organized to force a board retreat.

Citizens *can* be effective, forceful participants in school district decision making in response to declining enrollment, including closing schools if necessary. To be effective, however, they must help define the issues of declining enrollment as affecting the educational opportunities of all district children. They must become as convinced of the need for change and as knowledgeable about issues and options as school administrators and board members.

School enrollment has been declining in some parts of the country for as long as 15 years. Many communities have successfully responded to declining enrollment—have developed district organizations and programs to provide the educational programs desired by the community within its economic means, for a smaller number of students. These responses have included closing schools among other things, and have enjoyed a broad degree of community support. It is encouraging to note that the successful communities have included extensive, well-organized involvement of community citizens.

The Larger Picture of Community Change

It may be helpful to pause for a minute, to place a specific concern about closing a school into a broader perspective. What may be an immediate local school crisis from one point of view is but a small part of a sweeping community change that is national in scope, and that affects a whole host of social institutions including the public school system. Although many of these changes have been quite dramatic in the last 10 years, public awareness of change has not kept pace.

Demographic Changes

The age profile of the population has been shifting markedly. In just the last decade, the 1970s, the number of children under age 14 dropped 14 percent while the number of people over 64 increased 24 percent. The median age of the nation's population increased by two years in the 1970s, from 28 to 30. The last time the median age was this high was in 1950 and reflected the reduced births during the Great Depression.

The number of births has decreased for about 15 years, starting in the early 1960s, following 15 years of increase. Only recently has the total number of births increased slightly. The number of births expected for each woman is now 1.8, and has been below the replacement rate of 2.1 since 1972.

Geographic distribution of the nation's population is shifting to the West and Southwest, where the median age is about two years below that of the Northeast. The last decade has seen a dramatic reversal in metropolitan and non-metropolitan growth trends throughout the nation. Between 1970 and 1980, non-metropolitan areas grew nearly

twice as fast as metropolitan areas; in the 1960s decade, metropolitan growth rates had been more than triple those of non-metropolitan areas.

Lifestyle Changes

Composition of households and families is changing. The average number of people living together in a single household has been decreasing steadily. The proportion of family households* that include a husband, wife, and one or more children dropped from 50 percent to 42 percent in the 1970s. Non-family households increased more than 40 percent, and unmarried couples doubled.

Single-parent families are significantly more common. The last decade has seen the number of single-parent families almost double, to the point where about one in five children live with only one parent, up from 12 per cent in 1970. Best estimates are that nearly one-half of all children born in the mid-1970s will live with only one parent at some time before reaching age 18. The ratio of divorced to married people doubled in this last decade.

Labor force participation of women with children has increased to over half, and 43 percent of married women with preschool age children are now in the labor force, compared to 19 percent in 1960. Roughly one-third of mothers with children less than a year old are also in the labor force.

Impact on Schools

Total K-12 public school enrollment peaked in 1971, at 46.1 million and is projected to hit a low in 1984 at 38.5 million, a 16 per cent decrease. Enrollment decline started gradually but accelerated in the second half of the 1970s.

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*Family as defined by the Census Bureau means two or more people related by "blood, marriage, or adoption." A household is defined as all people living together in a single housing unit.

So far, it is estimated that 7,000 schools have been closed as a result of declining enrollment.

At the elementary school level (K-8), enrollment peaked in 1969 and is expected to drop 18 percent to a 1984 low. Best estimates now are that elementary enrollment will increase some after 1984, reaching the 1977 level again by 1990, still about two million below the 1969 peak level.

High school enrollment trends lag behind elementary schools, of course. High school (9-12) enrollment did not peak until 1976, and is expected to hit bottom at the end of the 1980s, 25 percent below the peak level.

Lifestyle changes have been felt by the schools, too. More and more teachers and administrators are concerned about the needs of students in single-parent families. The demand for after-school programs, and full-day kindergarten, is great. Parents of school-age children no longer form the majority of taxpayers or voters in most school districts—their number has dropped to less than 40 percent nationally. School administrators and school board members have greater cause to consider the political force and interests of "non-parent" voters.

Impact on Other Institutions

The mix of services in demand from all social institutions is changing, in line with changes in demography and lifestyle. Municipal government, private agencies and organizations, some school districts, and other service-delivering agencies are all trying to meet these new needs, but demand far exceeds services.

Older people are noticeably more powerful, and services and centers for senior citizens are much more numerous. As more old people live longer, the need for services to homebound and frail, such as Meals on Wheels and visiting nurses, increases.

Need for day care and nursery school programs far exceeds their availability. One of the more interesting statistics is that while the

number of preschool age children dropped by more than 30 percent in the 1970s, enrollment in nursery schools more than doubled. Young children are becoming more "visible."

Many community organizations which have traditionally drawn their members from women who do not work outside the house, and have played an important role in holding communities together, are now having trouble maintaining membership. Many communities are in the midst of a "volunteer crisis."

Communities which grew rapidly during a short period of years—such as many suburban towns—have been essentially one-generation communities. The young people who moved in during their growth period, and fueled rapid school expansion, are now past the school-age years. Because these towns lack a good housing mix, older people are not moving out of their large-ish homes and young people are not moving in. National demographic trends are being felt in exaggerated terms in these communities.

Enrollment decline is not an isolated phenomenon affecting only our schools. Rather, enrollment decline is one aspect of dramatic demographic change that affects all aspects of our communities and our institutions. Citizens involved in school closing issues should understand the larger context, as it gives dimension to the problem, and to the solution.

Ingredients of Successful Citizen Involvement

In the best of all possible worlds, citizens would get involved at the early stages of problem recognition and would be active participants in exploring and determining adequate solutions. Unfortunately, we don't live in such a world, and more often issues of declining enrollment and school closings are enveloped in an aura of crisis, distrust, and hostility.

From our experience, crises in closing schools stem from:

- lack of sufficient warning that major changes are coming
- denial or disbelief that changes will really happen
- lack of citizen involvement until a solution is proposed
- lack of ground rules for closing schools, inconsistent application of ground rules, or disagreement on the appropriate ground rules
- announcement of immediate closings with no time to react objectively
- distrust of basic facts and figures provided by the board of education
- inadequate planning for future use of surplus school space
- citizen disbelief that closing schools will improve educational programs and opportunities for district children
- distrust of motives of school board members and school administrators by citizens and vice versa.

In communities which have taken actions to deal with declining enrollment, have involved citizens, and have done so without massive uproar, certain ingredients have been common. These ingredients are worth reviewing in light

of your own community—what's happening or what is *not* happening; which ingredients may have been lacking in previous planning efforts and should be included this time around. Citizen pressure exerted towards creating an open and fair process for achieving solutions is much more effective than pressure exerted towards a predetermined solution.

Knowing When Change is Needed

Recognition of the need for change is by no means universal, especially since enrollment change is usually a gradual phenomenon occurring over a number of years. School boards very often make small changes over several years, without bringing them to public attention and before publicly announcing the need to close schools. This leaves them in the awkward position of having to create a sense of impending crisis, without any warning. Many citizens simply do not believe there is a crisis. Less often, school board members and even top school district administrators themselves do not pay attention to the creeping impact of enrollment decline.

Concerned district citizens should monitor the impact of decline, and raise it as an issue if the school board is reluctant to. If the board has already announced a school closing, or has announced that schools may be closed, citizens should review what the impact has been, and can reasonably be assumed to be if *no* changes were made.

Enrollment figures are, of course, the first item to check.

- In what year did enrollment peak, at the elementary level and at the secondary level?
- Has decline been steady since then, accelerating, or slowing down?
- What has been the cumulative percentage decline since the peak year?
- What level of decline is projected by the school district for the next two, five, and ten years?

- At what level, both numerically and as a percentage of the peak enrollment, does the district anticipate bottoming out?

Gross square footage/pupil indicates the degree of excess space in the system, and is one common measure of enrollment decline. Review the total amount of school building space the district has had for the past five or 10 years, divided by the total enrollment in each of those years. Increase in space/pupil is not, by itself, *necessarily* a bad result. Some schools were badly overcrowded in their peak years, and new programs have been introduced over the years that take more space, such as remedial reading or learning disabilities. Compare your recent, current, and projected space/pupil ratios with the standards established by the state education department. Keep in mind that for planning new schools today, the average figures recommended are 90-110 square feet/pupil for elementary schools and 120-140 square feet/pupil for secondary schools.

Pupils/instructional staff indicates the degree to which the district may be overstaffed. Review these figures for the last five or 10 years, and compare with district standards (if any) and state averages. Review the reduction in instructional staff, compared to reduction in enrollment. Has staff reduction lagged far behind pupil reduction?

Total grade level enrollment in each school is related to the number of classes that can be formed in a school for each grade. Often, declining enrollment in small schools results in awkward distributions—too many kids for one class and too few for two, according to district standards for pupil/teacher ratios. Most school districts maintain that all pupils should have the opportunity to have a choice between at least two teachers, at each grade. Review grade level enrollments for the past five years, teacher reductions, and the resulting numbers and sizes of classes.

Ratio of total annual operating costs per pupil will have risen some solely because of inflation. When enrollment declines, even the real cost per pupil tends to increase because expenses are not reduced at the same rate as enrollment. The instructional staff may be reduced, but not as fast as students, and remaining staff usually have more seniority and higher salaries. Cost of central administration, operation and maintenance of building space, and transportation are all spread over fewer students. Compare total operating costs per pupil over the last five years, discounting for general inflation and compare your district costs with other similar districts and with state-wide averages.

An increasing **ration of minority pupils to total pupils** is a common by-product of declining enrollment in districts where decline is concentrated in some sections of the district. When minority ratios are projected to increase beyond district standards, reorganization will be needed.

Defining the Problem Appropriately

The strategies or actions that will be considered, and the criteria that will be used to evaluate possible solutions depend, in large measure, on how the problem is defined. Although the problems of declining enrollment are manifested by too much space, too great expense for each pupil, and too large an instructional staff, a narrow definition resting only on these indicators will yield a "solution" to the symptoms, but not to the underlying problem.

The real problem posed by declining enrollment is how to organize and operate a school system for fewer students that: (a) provides the educational opportunities for all children in the district that the community desires, and (b) does so within the economic means of district resources.

Citizens can be very influential in seeing that the problem is defined broadly in these terms, and that possible solutions are evaluted in these terms. They may need to remind themselves,

and convince others whose interests are narrower, that this is the problem. Declining enrollment affects all grade levels throughout the district sooner or later and the focus of planning has to be as broad as the problem. Declining enrollment is also a long-range problem that requires a long-range solution. Planning should therefore be oriented toward the future, and immediate actions need to be evaluated in light of long-range trends, goals, and needs.

The secondary problem of declining enrollment is how to make the most productive use of space constructed with local and state funds and no longer needed for K-12 education.

This problem is often not addressed until a school has been closed and few viable options remain. The problem of surplus space has been compounded by our tendency to build schools in residential areas, thus reducing the choices for compatible reuse.

Establishing Priorities for Evaluating Possible Strategies and Actions

In communities which have successfully handled declining enrollment, the ground rules for developing and recognizing acceptable solutions have been established before specific actions are proposed. While a great deal of public debate can be anticipated when establishing the ground rules, once they have been established and have broad community support, solutions are easier to find.

In contrast, among communities where declining enrollment and school closing have caused enormous distress and conflict, the ground rules were usually not subscribed to by community residents, or the rules were applied inconsistently. The result has been either that a school board proposes a solution which is good in terms of the ground rules *it* is using, while community residents oppose the solution based on different ground rules *they* are using, or the proposed solution violates the ground rules established by the board itself.

Evaluation criteria developed in a variety of

communities with community participation have included such items as:

- "Each school should remain large enough to offer a complete program without over-reliance on multi-grade classrooms;
- Each school should operate near capacity without eliminating special programs;
- Each school should come within 30 per cent of the district's over-all racial balance;
- Each school should provide a minimum of two sections of each grade."

Other factors have included operational costs of building, program offerings, suitability of facility and costs of upgrading, transportation impact, feasibility of alternate uses for any closed schools, anticipated residential location of students in the future, and potential for joint use.

Widespread Distribution of Information Throughout the Community

The community should be kept informed of all data, planning steps, analysis, and tentative solutions under consideration throughout a planning process. Communication among those most involved in planning and other community residents should flow freely. Community members should have the opportunity to become as knowledgeable as the "experts."

By the time a specific action is proposed, community residents should not be disputing the base facts of enrollment decline.

Citizen planning and advisory committees have the same responsibility for informing the community as do school boards. A citizen committee which works in isolation and then publicly announces its recommendations faces the same credibility problem as a school board that works in isolation. Responsibility for developing an informed citizenry rests both with the citizens and with those who have the information. "But our meetings are always open to the public" is a lame excuse. Regular newsletters from school boards, administration,

and citizen committees, as well as coverage in local news media should present all basic data, and keep the community informed of deliberations and special meetings.

Open Debate of All Alternatives

If the process for arriving at solutions and the proposed solutions are to have credibility, all alternatives must be given a full hearing and should be evaluated according to pre-established ground rules for acceptability. If citizens develop alternate proposals which meet the ground rules, the school board should be obligated to give these proposals serious consideration.

The citizen who is opposed to closing a specific school, and who is willing to consider any option *except* closing that school is just as much at fault as the school superintendent who rejects, out of hand, sharing principals between two schools.

One advantage of broad citizen involvement is that strategies may surface which would not otherwise. Not all strategies will be feasible, because the district must operate within certain constraints, but they all deserve a fair hearing. When alternatives have not received a fair hearing, or they have been considered and rejected privately, citizens are perfectly justified in crying foul.

A Cooperative Spirit of Problem Solving

Although to some citizens, and some board members, and some administrators, and some teachers, this may sound like idealistic hogwash, many communities *have* managed to achieve a cooperative spirit of problem solving in response to declining enrollment.

Widespread availability of information, citizen participation in developing ground rules for acceptable solutions and open exploration of all alternatives contribute to achieving a cooperative spirit. Underlying these has to be first, recognition that people can hold very differing opinions and second, respect on the

part of all for the right of each person to argue for his or her position. Personal accusations of a vindictive sort are very damaging. Try to avoid deep divisions that will continue long after the problem is solved—parents vs. nonparents, young vs. old, school vs. school.

Adequate Transition Period and Planning

Providing enough time for careful transitions, and making good use of that time to plan the transition are hallmarks of communities which have successfully managed declining enrollment.

For example, consolidation of several schools and closing of some buildings may require a year of transition planning. During this year, parents and students of the involved schools can get to know each other, staffing, administrative, and educational issues can be handled and meshed, the future use of a surplus building can be determined, and safe transportation routes can be worked out.

Other responses to declining enrollment will require longer transition periods. For example, developing a flexible high school staff, another possible strategy, will take a number of years. This strategy might include setting up in-service training programs, providing opportunities and incentives for refresher training in areas of certification in which a person has not taught for a long time or for acquisition of new areas of expertise, and hiring new staff members willing and qualified to teach in several areas. Teacher contracts may have to be modified and new school board policies established.

Similarly, reorganization of district grade structure from junior high school to middle school, and from a 10-12 to a 9-12 high school is a long-range strategy that needs time for implementation. Curriculum review and change, teacher training, parent orientation and possibly facilities improvements to support new programs, may dictate a very active two-year transition period.

Getting Involved

Many school boards vote to close schools in an atmosphere of crisis, and many citizens get involved with a sense of crisis. Indeed, too often, board action and citizen involvement both need that crisis mentality to get started. Without it, nothing happens.

However, once interest has broken through the surface, and people are ready to *do* something, the most productive effort shifts the emotional climate to one in which an orderly set of actions and contingencies can be developed, in response to and in anticipation of change.

Organizing for Involvement

An individual parent/citizen will have a difficult time trying to influence the decision-making process alone. Organized group activity will be much more effective—there is simply too much to do alone.

Three models can be used to describe the basic involvement organizations possible:

Formal Body Appointed by Board. The school board may appoint a Citizen Advisory Committee, a Task Force on Declining Enrollment, or some other group with a special mandate to make recommendations about school closings and declining enrollment. Alternatively, the board might use an existing advisory committee and give it the special assignment to examine declining enrollment. The special task force is the better route, because more viewpoints should be represented than are likely to be on a standing committee.

Formal Independent Organization. In many communities there are existing organizations, independent of the school board, which are highly respected and could undertake to examine declining enrollment on their own. These might include, for

example, a council of PTA's or other parent group, a school improvement council, League of Women Voters, or a community issues task force.

Ad Hoc Organizations. Citizens may organize to examine the single issue of school closings and declining enrollment. In many communities, these organizations are formed with a single objective in mind—to keep all schools open, or to keep a single school open. There may be a number of competing organizations of this type, each trying to keep *their* school open, while urging that another be closed instead. To the degree that an ad hoc committee has a narrow objective, and represents a special set of interests, it will suffer from lack of credibility. (It may succeed in keeping a school open, but as stated earlier, this may be a narrow victory.)

Citizens may not be in a position to choose which model of organization to follow, or to join. A board-appointed committee may have more initial power, since it is sanctioned by the board, but it may also have a difficult time if it tries to define its job more broadly than the board does. In a community all three forms of organization may be present at the same time.

Any form of citizen involvement must rely on persuasion, since the legal authority to make decisions rests squarely with the board of education.

Credibility. Citizen advocacy will be only as effective as the credibility and influence of the citizens involved. Credibility is enhanced by:

- good, accurate information
- rational and pragmatic approach
- representation of a broad range of known interest groups
- goals and concerns that encompass the whole district.

Citizens who are seeking effective organized involvement, then, must first achieve credibility.

- Can you recruit other people from throughout the district? If not, why not?
- Can you recruit people who represent different interests—parents and non-parents, old and young?
- Is your bottom line simply to keep "your" school open, regardless?
- If it is closed, will you fold up your tent and quit?
- Are you willing to commit yourself to sustained involvement for the benefit of the whole district community?

Courses of Action

The courses of action open to any citizen group will depend, in part, on when the group gets involved and how far along the decision-making process is. Obviously, becoming well-informed and informing others, attending school board meetings and any other public forums to contribute and to listen to other points of view are important at all times.

Early Involvement. In the best case, citizens would get involved at the very beginning, when the problem is first recognized and defined. If there is an independent citizen monitoring organization, and the school board is slow to take action, that organization may in fact initiate public recognition of a problem.

Citizen involvement should be directed towards getting the board to establish a cooperative planning process which includes the ingredients of successful citizen involvement: broad definition of the problem, public discussion in establishing ground rules for evaluating proposed solutions, widespread distribution of information, open debate of all alternatives, and adequate transition period planning.

Use of media, private meetings with board members and administrators, and public speaking at board meetings are all instruments of persuasion.

Involvement During the Decision-Making Process. If the board has already begun a

process, but has not yet announced a decision, citizens can start by reviewing what has been done to date—what information has been gathered, and made known to the community at large, what ground rules have been established, and what mechanisms for participation by a broad spectrum of citizens are available.

An independent citizen organization, having identified weaknesses or gaps in the process that is under way, might undertake specific actions which complement what the board has started.

For example, a citizen group might be in a better position to host a series of community forums to solicit reactions to different strategies, if a school board forum is likely to deteriorate into a shouting match. Citizens might undertake other information-gathering tasks that the school board may not do, such as a community preschool census, visits to communities which have carried out different strategies, or a survey of possible shared uses for school buildings. Citizens could establish several information centers in the community, where documents developed in the course of study are available for public use outside as well as within normal working hours.

An organized citizen group could gather expert analysis of special topics, using expertise of community residents or bringing in outside consultants. Special topics might include enrollment projections, facility conditions and feasibility of building reuse, changing structure of school finance, and modelling impacts of various strategies. Outside consultants may confirm the findings of the board, or may raise further questions for consideration. Outside help may be available from municipal planning agencies, the state education department, and national citizen advocacy groups*, as well as through private consultants.

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* National advocacy groups listed in Appendix B.

Citizens have the right to know what actions the board is taking and to have access to public information. If the board or administrators are not willing to open meetings or records to the public, citizens may have to make use of "sunshine laws" and the Freedom of Information Act to gain access.*

Involvement After a Decision Has Been Made. Citizens whose interest has been awakened because the school board has already announced the closing of a specific school should first attempt to learn as much about the making of that decision as possible. Usually, all the information is not available in public documents, nor will it be forthcoming in public school board meetings—especially not in angry confrontations. Find one or two board members who are willing to talk privately, and send your most calm and rational representatives to meet with them.

When you have as much information as you can get, evaluate your own impressions and the impressions that a disinterested outsider might form. Is the decision really bad—or wrong—from a district-wide perspective? Is it harmful? Can you separate your reactions to the assumptions and methods used to reach the decisions, to the emotions and worries the decision causes, and to the merits of the decision itself? Even if you disagree, do you feel the board acted in good faith?

If you truly feel the board's decision was wrong and harmful, then you can attempt to get the decision reversed or deferred pending further review, or at least get implementation of the decision deferred to permit better transition planning.

Reversal is likely to happen only if your group is politically strong enough to force the board to retreat, or to unseat board members. If you stop here, without also succeeding in

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*For specifics, see Appendix C, *Open Meeting Laws, Freedom of Information.*

getting a decision-making process under way with broader citizen participation, you have stopped too soon.

You could also recruit a lawyer to file administrative appeals to the state education department, or legal appeals through state courts. However, if the board's enrollment data is reasonably accurate, and if the proposed solution is reasonable in terms of numbers and space, and if the board acted in good faith and did not grossly violate its own policies, appeals through either channel will probably not succeed in reversing the decision. They may be best thought of as stalling strategies to allow you time to get better organized, at the expense of introducing an adversary relationship.

Delay Pending Review is one result of filing appeals outside the district. It may also be accomplished within the district if you can convince the board that its decision-making process was too narrow, incomplete, or otherwise deficient. This may be a face-saving way for the board to allow a citizen group an opportunity to review data and criteria and suggest alternate solutions without quite admitting error. It may provide the opportunity to investigate new issues or to bring in outside consultants.

Postponed Implementation, while not changing the decision to close a school, may provide more time to develop a smooth transition for consolidating school programs and finding alternate uses for closed school space. Transition planning teams can also consider other strategies, described in a later section, that go beyond merely closing schools and are important to a comprehensive response to declining enrollment.

There are no hard and fast rules for securing citizen involvement. Much depends on the nature of the community and past experience with involvement techniques. The best single guide is to remain calm and logical, to persist in the attempt, and to get as many people of as many persuasions as possible involved

towards the same end. Nothing shuts off an administrator or a school board as fast as a display of angry emotion. The "hysterical parent" does not have much chance of being effective.

Getting Information

Access to information is power. Intelligent decisions can only be made, and trade-offs evaluated in the context of good information. If school boards and administrators have a monopoly on information, citizens can neither participate in making decisions nor effectively dispute proposed solutions. All of the information identified in this section should be widely available to concerned citizens.

If it is not, citizens should ask for it. Information needs include basic descriptions of the school system (past, current, and projected); information about the legal, regulatory, and contractual environments within which actions must take place; and projected impacts of alternative strategies.

Enrollment

Enrollment projections are based on assumptions about continuation or change in recent trends. Good enrollment projections are crucial. Casual perceptions of community change are notoriously unreliable. Projections for the near future in most districts have proved to be quite reliable as projection techniques have become more sophisticated. Unless a community experiences massive in-migration or out-migration of families with school-age children, enrollment changes tend to be gradual. Long-range projections are usually made with several sets of assumptions, yielding high, low, and "most likely" figures. Data used to make projections include the following:

- **enrollment trends, grade by grade, school by school**

  Recent enrollment trends throughout the district are the basic starting point. They can identify differential rates of growth and decline for specific geographic areas of a district.

- **grade to grade retention ratios**
  If the same number of pupils enroll in a specific area as enrolled in the previous grade the year before, the "retention ratio" is 1.0. If more students enroll, the ratio is greater than 1.0; if fewer enroll, it is less than 1.0.

Common factors affecting retention ratios are drop-out rates, and loss or gain of pupils at a specific grade due to transfer to or from private and parochial schools.

- **pupil yield per dwelling**
  Districts may calculate the recent average ratio of pupils per dwelling unit to project the impact of new housing construction or loss of housing units. Expected changes in dwelling units are usually estimated by municipal and county planning agencies and building permit offices.
- **local birth rates**
  Districts may monitor the number of births in local hospitals to determine likely enrollment changes resulting from births to current residents.
- **pre-school census**
  More districts are conducting a yearly census of resident families to get a closer fix on the number of children who can be expected to enroll in kindergarten or first grade in the near future. In some communities a parent/citizen organization has assumed responsibility for conducting a pre-school census.

Facilities

Building Capacity. Each building in a school district has a specific capacity rating assigned by the state education department, based on the number and size of classrooms, assumptions about the size of class in each classroom, and state requirements for libraries and other special-purpose rooms. Few schools are actually used at 100 per cent or 90 per cent of rated capacity—they would be considered crowded.

Some districts have developed a "functional capacity" rating to apply locally which incorporates a certain amount of elbow room, and room for special functions such as reading labs, which are not used in the state formulae. If the existing space arrangement within a building might be changed, a "building shell capacity" rating would be higher if space were divided more efficiently.

As enrollment has declined, many classrooms have been used at less than their capacity (fewer pupils/teacher), and many have been converted to other uses, such as teacher lounges and planning areas, tutoring areas, band practice rooms, or equipment storage. Very rarely will rooms simply be idle. Therefore, every room in a school may be used for something *and* at the same time the school may be used at well below its rated or functional capacity.

Other basic items of facility information needed are:

- state minimum standards for facilities and sites
- regulations concerning health, safety, and handicapped access issues
- district standards, if any
- ownership of school buildings

For each school in the district:

- gross square feet/pupil, historic and projected
- operating and maintenance costs, historic and projected, computed per square foot and per pupil
- building utilization, historic and projected, related to various definitions of building capacity
- condition of building and grounds
- capital improvements needed to building and grounds—reasons and estimated costs
- amount and length of bonded indebtedness

- zoning of each school land parcel, (so-called "underlying zoning," or if none, zoning and use of surrounding parcels)

Staff

Pupil/teacher ratios, like building capacity, can mean different things to different people depending on how the ratio is defined and for what purpose it is being used. "Teachers" may include regular classroom teachers, specialists such as art teachers, librarians, or guidance counselors, special education teachers, and others. Sometimes it includes all certified staff, which means most administrators, too.

Useful ratios, for monitoring trends and projecting impacts would include:

- "regular" pupils/"regular classroom teachers" in elementary grades
- special education pupils/special education teachers
- subject area enrollment in secondary grades/subject area teachers in secondary grades
- total pupils/total professional staff

Other basic information about staff includes:

- staffing patterns at each school
- age and active areas of certification of teaching staff and administrators
- state law, board policy and contract provisions regarding salary and benefits, in-service training, reduction in force, retirement, part-time employment, change of teaching assignments, class size, and other conditions and terms of employment

Educational Program

- state minimum standards and district minimum standards, if different
- educational program offerings and organization at each grade and school level
- high school courses—number and type of courses and enrollment (of particular interest are courses listed in the catalog but

not actually offered because of "insufficient" enrollment, courses with low enrollment, and combined sections)
- exceptionally good programs special to one school, which might be expanded to other district schools

Much of the basic information needed to assess the educational impact of declining enrollment and possible strategies is "soft"—that is, it cannot be reduced to numbers easily. Active involvement of school faculty is therefore important in evaluating educational program issues.

Transportation

Parents, especially, are concerned about how far their children travel to school, means of transportation, safety, and costs. Basic data for understanding transportation impacts include:

- state laws and regulations and district policies regarding distance and other eligibility criteria for bus transportation
- proportion of transportation costs reimbursed through state aid, and total transportation costs
- maps showing residential location of students (current and projected), schools and capacities, major transportation routes and geographical barriers, current attendance boundaries and busing patterns

Finance

The legal and regulatory environment of school district finance is in a state of flux. Many major changes were made in the latter part of the 1970s through legislative action, referenda, and judicial decisions and many more are expected in the 1980s. School district finance is less and less a function of local decision making. Flexibility to establish budgets and tax rates has been diminished by restraints on budget and/or tax increases in many states. The proportion of school district income derived

from state aid has been increasing—nationwide it is 48 percent and is anticipated to level off at about 50 percent—at the same time that many state governments are experiencing a real, after inflation, decline in revenue. In many states, efforts to increase the equity of education expenditures are structured to hold steady the spending of traditionally high-spending districts, while increasing resources for traditionally low-spending districts. The impact of this is a net real loss of spending power for many suburban districts.

Citizens in each district should become knowledgeable about recent and anticipated changes in school finance systems in their state. Basic data needs include:

- structure of state aid programs
- flexibility of district to set tax rates and budgets
- fiscal dependence or independence of the school district with regard to municipal governments
- past, current, and projected per pupil cost of the district's annual operating budget
- per pupil costs in similar, neighboring districts and state averages
- tax rates and tax sources

Budget reporting systems used by the school district should be examined to see whether they help or hinder analysis of possible strategies. For example, does the district know how much it really costs to operate each school building, or are figures only collected and reported for all buildings together?

Cost of School Closing. Projected savings or costs of closing a school building are a major topic of debate, one which in the long run is often a waste of time and effort. Almost any particular school closing may be presented as saving or costing money, depending on what items are included in the calculation. Costs/savings include one-time costs of closing a building and immediate savings through staff reduction (if possible) and possible costs of additional purchase of buses

or renovation of remaining buildings. Long-range costs/expenses can be compared for continuing to operate all schools and for operating fewer schools. Long-range costs/savings attributable to a specific closed school are highly variable and often indeterminate at the time of decision making. They depend on what becomes of the closed school, what income it generates or other benefits it provides the community and the importance attached to those, where income goes, balance on the bonded indebtedness, costs of vacancy and vandalism, and so on. These are in turn affected by the types of uses, and the degree of permanent change the community is willing to accept.

Alternative Uses of Surplus Space

An underlying concern in school closing debates is the uncertainty of future enrollment, and possible need for space, now surplus, if enrollment increases in the future. From long range enrollment projections, with high and low levels, a district can estimate the degree of uncertainty that can be accommodated in a core set of facilities through flexible grade organization in the future. It can also estimate the amount of "excess space" within those facilities needed—space which should be kept as school space, although available for other uses on a short-term basis.

Choices for use of surplus space include:

- keeping "excess space," operating schools below capacity
- leasing surplus school space *in* operating schools (shared or parallel use)
- long-term or short-term lease of school buildings and/or sites with varying degrees of structural change allowed
- sale or other permanent disposition

Analysis of alternatives should include long range as well as immediate cost implications. Board members, administrators, and citizens have to recognize, too, that there are

continuing costs associated with holding space. The more restrictions placed on alternate uses (the shorter the lease period, the fewer structural changes allowed and the more circumscribed the allowed activities) the greater the costs of holding space. These on-going costs of holding space available for possible future retrieval, have to also be compared with the feasibility and cost of new construction (whether new schools or new additions) in case of future need.

In addition, a series of questions must be asked to determine the legal and regulatory constraints on alternate uses of surplus space. Market conditions—the demand for use of space—have to be investigated and probable income determined. And finally, community and neighborhood sentiment need to be considered, and suitability of space for other uses evaluated. A detailed list of these questions is included in Appendix A.

In summary, citizens who seek effective involvement in finding solutions to declining enrollment must become fully knowledgeable about the condition of their local school district. This information exists, although it may not be volunteered to the general public. Citizens may have to apply pressure to achieve full disclosure.

Changes and Strategies to Consider

Closing one or more schools in a district may be the only way the community can continue to offer the kind of education it wants, at reasonable cost. However, by itself it is not the only answer. Depending on the extent of decline, and other district characteristics such as geographic size, location and number of school buildings, and number of students, other strategies may suffice for a while. And other strategies will have to be considered in conjunction with school closing, as part of a comprehensive response to enrollment decline.

Citizens can play an important role in seeing that all of these strategies are considered. Too often communities seem to develop a collective tunnel vision which limits discussion to the single topic of school closing.

Closing One or More Schools. Schools are closed to achieve more manageable and flexible groupings of teachers and students and to support broader educational programs. They are also closed to reduce expenses which accrue as a result of the school unit, such as lunch programs; building operation and maintenance, library materials and other equipment provided each school; and administrative staff.

Whenever school closing is proposed, parents and other citizens begin to search for information about optimum school size and optimum class size. We can perhaps save you a long and frustrating search by saying that the professional literature will not help here. There is no consensus, except that there are advantages and disadvantages to both bigness and smallness, and that there are means for overcoming the disadvantages of each. Of far

greater importance are the quality of teachers and educational program, and the degree of care and attention given to individual children.

When any item within the school becomes so small as to be a single unit—one class of third graders, one full-time business teacher—flexibility to deal with enrollment changes is greatly reduced. Extremes of largeness—whether more than 40 students in a class or several thousand students in a school—increase the chances for lack of individual care and attention.

A building which stops being used as a school need not stop being a resource for the community. Former schools *can* continue to benefit the community by providing better facilities for other community activities; by housing new programs such as day care, recreation, or senior citizen to meet changing community needs; or by literally housing elderly residents. School grounds *can* continue to be used as neighborhood playgrounds.

In theory, the possibilities for reuse of surplus school space are unlimited. School space has been used for offices and stores, apartments—especially for elderly housing, day-care centers and nursery schools, senior citizen centers, town halls, libraries, police headquarters, recreation and cultural centers, community education centers, corporate headquarters, training centers, warehouses, social service centers, town parks, regional special education centers, artist cooperatives, and mixtures of all of these.

Changing Boundaries and Attendance Patterns. School attendance boundaries can be adjusted to relieve crowding in one school and make use of available space in another school, when a community has uneven distribution of growth and decline, or when closing a school disrupts existing patterns. If a district can provide strength in a special program area through consolidating the program into fewer schools, attendance may be based on geographic clusters or enrollment

may be open to all students in the district. For example, special centers for handicapped children, special programs in arts, or sciences, or foreign language, may be strengthened by location in one place. Parents would then have the option of enrolling their children in any one of the schools offering a special program of interest.

Pairing Schools. Two schools, each with the same grade span, may be combined into a single administrative and educational unit. All children would attend one of the schools for several grades and then attend the other school for the last few grades. This strategy provides greater flexibility for grouping students and teachers at each grade level, while providing educational continuity throughout the grade span of the two schools and reducing administrative costs.

Mixed Age Classes. At the elementary school level, this strategy results in classes with students from two or more grades. Multi-age groups can provide flexibility for students with different learning paces that is hard to achieve in a single grade group. It also provides students the opportunity to learn from each other. This approach requires flexibility on the part of the teacher, but also allows the same teacher to work with students for a few years.

At the secondary level, this strategy is often used to offer more courses, in alternate years, than could be offered each year, by opening classes to students in several grades. It is usually a strategy for maintaining curricular strength in elective areas.

Sharing Teachers or Administrators Among Schools. Principals, guidance counselors, and special subject teachers, such as art and music, can be shared by two or more small district schools. This can provide administrative supervision and program strength that could not be justified full time for each school, while retaining teachers and administrators in a full-time capacity in their areas of expertise.

Part-time Teachers. When declining enrollment results in need for "fractional" teachers, part-time positions can be created for subject area teachers and specialists. These positions may be appealing to existing teachers who want to reduce their teaching load, perhaps in preparation for retirement or career change. Part-time positions may also appeal to new people who want flexible working schedules. Most school districts need to change policies and contracts to include non-salary benefits (health, seniority, retirement) in order to make part-time employment viable.

Increasing Flexibility of Instructional Staff. If a district has teachers who are capable and willing to teach in more than one subject area, and at more than one grade span, it has enormous flexibility in meeting changing needs during declining enrollment. This long-range strategy would include training in new areas (or refresher training in rusty areas) for existing staff and policies for hiring new staff with multiple certifications. Contract provisions for changing teaching assignments usually need to be negotiated.

Changing Grade Organization of District Schools. During declining enrollment, this strategy usually means moving an additional grade level or two into the high school building, to create a 9-12 high school, or a combined junior/senior high school, and possibly changing a 7-9 junior high school to a 6-8 middle school. This strategy allows the district to get better use out of expensive facilities in the high school building, and gives students access to better equipment and a broader range of courses. It may allow for curriculum restructuring which was not feasible in previous organizational arrangements. District-wide, comprehensive reorganization cannot take place until smaller classes reach the junior and senior high school grades.

Most people—parents, teachers, administrators, and board members alike—are reasonably satisfied with their existing organization. Any proposed change represents a threat.

For parents, the threat is usually related to mixing their children with older children. A parent of a fifth grader now in a K-6 school may not like the idea of a 5-8 middle school. A parent of an eighth grader now in a 7-8 junior high school may embrace the middle school concept and reject the 7-12 combined junior/senior high school.

There is probably greater diversity in grade organization today than there has been at any time in the past. School districts are organized with schools of almost any consecutive grade sequence imaginable: K-2, K-4, K-5, K-6, K-8, 3-4, 3-7, 4-6, 4-7, 5-6, 5-8, 6-8, 7-12, 7-8, 8-9, 9-12, 10-12.

Regardless of the grades sharing a building, the building can be subdivided educationally and administratively into different grade spans. For example, a school building housing grades 7-12 can be run as a junior high school and a high school. A school with grades K-8 may be run as a K-6 elementary and 7-8 junior high, or a K-5 elementary and a 6-8 middle school.

Common sense and wisdom suggest that with careful attention to the educational program and concern for students and staff, any grade structure can be made satisfactory.

Changing Curriculum and Teaching Methods. Declining enrollment offers an incentive to review curriculum offerings and teaching methods throughout the district: multi-age groups and teamed teachers, middle school curriculum that is less rigid than the traditional junior high school, individual study, science lab courses that cross disciplinary boundaries, large lecture courses and small seminars where appropriate, individualized language instruction through use of programmed tapes in many languages, new elective courses that combine the most successful components of related courses offered previously. The potential for curriculum renewal which also makes best use of teachers and space is enormous.

Cooperating with Other Districts. Just as consolidating special programs within fewer

schools in a district, or sharing teachers among district schools can retain or improve program strength efficiently for larger districts, cooperating with neighboring districts may make sense for smaller school districts. Districts may cooperate directly, through jointly hiring teachers or coordinating special programs in host schools. Several districts may form or join a consortium to offer special programs on a regional basis, such as technical and career programs at the high school level or enrichment programs for gifted students. This strategy is somewhat more complex, because it requires working between two or more administrative and legal entities.

Space Realignment. In order to make best use of many of these strategies, districts may have to renovate buildings either to upgrade facilities or to rearrange spaces to fit new functions. Constructing a new addition to an existing building may even be reasonable. As one example, using a standard size classroom for a reading tutoring program is not only a gross waste of space, it is not the best environment for tutoring either. Too many people feel locked in to the existing space configuration (or worse yet, they *don't* feel locked in—they just don't consider change at all). Investing in building changes can improve educational programs and increase operating efficiency over the long term.

Sharing School Space with Non-school Users. Sharing surplus school space with others can offset the operating costs of school buildings that are not fully needed for regular school purposes, but which can nonetheless provide a good educational program for smaller numbers of pupils. Likely users of space can also often enrich the educational program and benefit the community. For example, day-care programs and senior citizen programs need space like that available in schools, and rarely available elsewhere. They have successfully shared many schools. In the case of day-care centers in high schools, students studying child care can gain practical

experience by helping to run the centers. Senior citizens based in schools often get involved with student projects and classes. Artists or dancers—or computer consultants—can use school space and provide educational experience to students. The municipal recreation department can use school space, and provide after-school programs to students.

As the percentage of taxpayers and voters with children in school continues to decline below 40 percent, sharing space for other community purposes which broadens the clientele using schools may be very practical politics for the school district to pursue.

Finding Other Uses for Surplus Space and Surplus Sites

Possible alternative uses for surplus space within schools and for surplus space and land resulting from closing a school should be considered when investigating alternative strategies. In some communities potential for alternate use is one of the formal evaluation criteria for judging possible solutions, once a general decision has been made to close a school.

There will always be debate about how much weight should be given to alternate use in a decision-making process whose prime goal is to provide for children's education. School board members, administrators, and some citizens may prefer to ignore it, claiming that the district "should not be in the real estate business." Other citizens, whose prime concern is reducing educational costs, may advocate selling the most commercially valuable piece of district real estate for the highest possible price and returning it to the tax rolls. Regardless of how people feel, the school district *is* "in the real estate business" as soon as it has surplus space and the real estate is special, because it is a public asset.

Uncertainty about the future use of surplus school space produces an acute level of anxiety among neighbors of any affected school and concern among all citizens who

may be similarly affected in the future. A district which fails to plan for alternate uses is in danger of ending up with empty, boarded-up buildings that continue to drain district resources. The process of evaluating future uses and following through on the selected one can well take a year or more. Districts should allow sufficient time for this process so that there can be a smooth transition between school use and a future use.

Beyond School Closing—Transitions

Once the decision to close a school has been made, a transition period begins. If the decision is made with a year's lead time, a very thorough transition can be undertaken; if the decision to close in June is made in May, less adequate transitions are possible.

Parents should be aware that transitions are difficult for everybody—students, instructional staff, administrators, custodians, and clerical staff. Some of the difficulties are personal—establishing new relationships and friendships; some are clerical—collecting and redistributing records and equipment; some are educational—meshing educational programs and teaching styles of several schools. School staff may also be uncertain about retaining jobs and teaching assignments.

School closings and the changes which follow vary tremendously. Two schools may be consolidated, or children from one school may be reassigned to several schools. A school closing may be part of a larger reorganization in which children from many schools are reassigned, and school grade levels are reorganized. Major educational changes may accompany, for example, a shift from a junior high school program to a middle school program.

The basic principles which citizens can use to ease the transition are similar. They are a combination of familiarization and hospitality. Students and parents from the school to be closed and the schools that will be receiving them need to become acquainted. Students and parents need to become familiar with the new buildings and new teachers as well.

Mechanisms which have been helpful include:

- class visits between schools
- joint theatrical, art, or music productions by two schools
- formation of a joint parents' organization ahead of time, or provision for merging organizations
- open houses, school tours, opportunities for parents and students to meet new teachers and administrators
- picnics and parties
- provision for students from the closing school to try out for athletic teams, yearbook or newspaper, or other student activities that select participants the spring before the academic year.

Activities which "break the ice" and make students and parents feel welcomed at their new school are especially important if the school closing decision follows bitter community turmoil. Time for community healing is needed. If school closing is perceived as having winners and losers, the "winners" have a major responsibility for welcoming those whose school was closed.

The closing of a school should also be officially recognized and commemorated—a school should not just fade away. Closing a school is emotional, not only for those immediately affected, but for the whole community. It is visible evidence of community change, of the end of an era.

Probably, too, school districts should document the experiences of children and parents a year or two after the school closing. An enormous amount of publicity is generated during the decision to close a school, much of it negative. However, most children, parents and teachers adapt well to new circumstances (if community divisions are not so great as to be unbridgeable). Parents can make a positive contribution by monitoring the transition and experiences in the new schools and providing guidance on improving transitions in the future.

At the same time that students, parents, and teachers are preparing for reassignment to new schools, a parallel effort should be under way to prepare for a transition of use for the closed school building.

The building transition may be a difficult one for parents of children attending that school to address. It may seem of secondary importance to them. Or, if they are contesting the decision to close, they may feel they would be undermining their cause if they considered reuse. Other citizens in the community may have to take the lead in planning for reuse.

Planning for reuse should not be ignored, however. An empty, boarded up building is demoralizing. It is also an invitation to vandals. It is expensive to maintain, and likely to deteriorate.

A smooth transition from school use to some other use is highly desirable, not only from a practical viewpoint, but from a symbolic and psychological perspective. Just as the closing marks the end of an era, transition to a new use marks the beginning of a new era. Without that sense of renewal, enrollment decline tends to be viewed as community decline rather than as one sign of community change.

Summary

School enrollment is declining throughout most of the country as communities are changing, service needs are changing, and competiton for public resources is increasing. Closing of schools is often a necessary response to these changes. It can be a wrenching experience which divides community residents for a long time to come, or it can be a time for community residents to come together to meet new challenges. Parents and other citizens have a right and a responsibility to become involved in developing solutions to declining enrollment.

Key points to remember in seeking positive involvement are:

- Declining enrollment affects the ability of the schools to provide good education to all children in the district—its impact, and therefore the solutions, are much broader than any single school.
- While closing a school may be one of the actions required, it is not by itself a total solution.
- Citizens who seek organized involvement in decision making should be representative of all segments of the community.
- Credible information about the district, its enrollment, schools, finances, and staffing is an essential starting point.
- Ground rules, worked out in advance, acceptable to all concerned, and applied consistently are basic to arriving at acceptable solutions.
- Time is the critical element—time to gather and analyze information, involve the broader community, explore alternatives, keep the community involved, and plan for transitions.

- School reuse plans should be developed along with closing decisions. Avoid ending up with an empty, unused building which becomes vandalized and deteriorated.

- Legal or administrative appeals in most cases will not be successful; nor will replacing a school board member solve "the problem."

Appendix A

Further questions to answer about reuse of surplus school property

The following information needs to be gathered or developed:

- amount of space needed for high and low-range enrollment projections, 10 and 15 years
- relative costs of maintaining underused space, short-term and long-term leases, sale and new construction if high-range projections are realized
- amount and remaining term of bonded indebtedness, if any
- value of space—break-even cost of operating, maintaining, insuring, and managing it on a per square foot basis, translated into break-even rental figures; appraised sale value, for comparison with purchase offers (experience indicates that few schools can actually be sold for their appraised value)
- assessment of market demand and realistic income estimates
- feasibility of separating building and grounds for reuse
- possibility of using space for other community needs

The following questions need to be asked to determine legal and regulatory constraints. These constraints may be present in state laws or regulations, municipal laws or policies, or school board policies.

This set of questions is relevant to use of space in operating schools for non-school purposes:

- Can the school board rent space in a building that houses K-12 programs?
- Can the school board allow any group to rent space in a school? What are the limitations?
- Are there limitations on the length of lease a school board can enter into?

- Must the school board charge the same rent to all users? Is a minimum level of rent required?
- Who receives rental income (municipality or school board)? What can it be used for?
- Are there procedural requirements for selecting users?
- Must the space used for the K-12 program be physically separated from space used for other purposes (by a wall, for example, which might require building modification of doors, staircases, bathrooms)?
- Must the "non-school" portion meet building codes for other uses, and if so, would that require major structural changes? Would introduction of new uses require structural changes needed for current codes?
- Can the school board spend money to make buildings suited for parallel use, if it recoups that investment from rental income over the term of the lease?
- What are the tax implications of mixed school and non-school uses in the same building?
- Must the school board seek permission from any state agency, or get formal community approval before renting space in a school building?

This set of questions is relevant to reuse of entire school buildings:

- Who owns the school building and school site (school district, or municipality, or county)?
- Can the school board lease or sell an empty building, or parts of one? Can it lease or sell a building and the surrounding grounds separately?
- Can the school board lease a school to one umbrella organization, which then sub-leases portions to other organizations? Or, must the school board directly manage a building it continues to own?
- Must a school be formally declared surplus before it can be leased or sold for other uses?

- Does state law stipulate a process, requiring public participation or voter approval, for lease or sale of a school? Is approval from any state agency required?
- Can a surplus school, or part of it, be leased or sold to any group? Can it be leased only to specific kinds of groups?
- Must activities and uses for surplus schools conform to local zoning codes under lease arrangements? (It must under conditions of sale.)
- Can the school board enter into both long-term and short-term leases?
- Will the conditions affecting the amount of rent that can or must be charged—such as "fair market value"—reduce the pool of possible users?
- Will rent be sufficient to cover operating and maintenance costs, and to pay outstanding indebtedness?
- Who receives income from lease or sale of surplus property? What can it be used for? (Income from sale in one state must be used to repay original state construction assistance. In some states, income must be used for improvements to existing facilities.)
- What are the tax consequences of leasing a surplus school?
- Must a surplus building, leased for other uses, be brought up to current building and life safety codes?
- May a school district pay for modifications to a school building prior to lease by non-school organizations, if it intends to recover the cost over the term of the lease?
- If a surplus building is leased for other purposes, and later is brought back into use as a school, must it meet new building and life safety codes? What approvals are necessary from the state education department?

Appendix B

National Citizen Advocacy Organizations

American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102. Telephone: (215) 241-7000. Jacquelyn M. Ramos, National Representative, Education Program.

Programs in eight cities aim to support and educate citizens in such matters as student and language-minority rights, desegregation, discipline, minimum competency, school finance, and others.

Council for Basic Education, 725 Fifteenth Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20005. Telephone: (202) 347-4171. A. Graham Down, Executive Director.

Devoted to strengthening teaching and learning the basic subjects (English, mathematics, science, history, geography, government, foreign language, and the arts); publishes a monthly bulletin, *Basic Education*, occasional papers, and books. Also provides consultants, speakers, and information services to assist the public in understanding issues in basic education and to help improve curriculum. Membership: $15/year.

Home and School Institute (HSI), c/o Trinity College, Washington, DC, 20017. Telephone: (202) 466-3633. Dorothy Rich, Director.

Founded in 1956 to build student abilities and family life. HSI provides technical assistance to community agencies and schools, and conducts parent and teacher workshops and courses. Publications give practical suggestions for improving basic skills through "learning recipes." Write for list of publications.

Institute for Responsive Education (IRE), 704 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 62215. Telephone (617) 353-3309. Don Davies, Director.

Studies and assists citizen participation in educational decision-making; publicizes exemplary programs as well as incentives and barriers to participation. Major concerns include school-community councils, declining enrollment, collective bargaining. Write for list of publications.

National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE), Suite 410, Wilde Lake Village Green, Columbia, MD 21044. Telephone: Toll-free (800) 638-9675; MD (301) 997-9300. Carl Marburger, William Rioux, and Stan Salett, Senior Associates.

Dedicated to improving the quality of education through responsible participation of parents and citizens; provides technical assistance and monitors legislation. Publications include *Network* ($8.00 for 8 issues per year), handbooks, books, and slide-tape cassettes. Membership: $15/year.

National School Volunteer Program, Inc. (NSVP), 300 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. Telephone: (703) 836-4880. Sandra Gray, Executive Director.

NSVP helps its members improve and strengthen school volunteer programs by sharing ideas for recruitment, training, program evaluation, public relations, and other aspects of management through publications, workshops, and conferences. Monthly publication, *The School Volunteer*. Other publications include "Volunteers and Children with Special Needs," "Helping Children Learn at School and at Home." Write for complete list. Membership $5.00 or $35.00 (dependent on category).

Appendix C

References

"Indicators of Future School Enrollments: A Reference Manual for Planners," 1980.

Compilation of statistical data on enrollment and population trends and projections, migration, fertility and birth rates, etc.

Educational Research Service, Inc.
1800 North Kent St.
Arlington, VA 22209
$15.00
Stock # 218-00066

"Planning for Declining Enrollment in Single High School Districts," Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1981

Handbook on problems, strategies, and issues of declining enrollment as they apply to high schools in districts with only one high school—nearly three out of four districts in the United States. Improving and maintaining educational quality.

Superintendent of Documents
U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, D.C. 20402
$4.00
Stock # 065-000-00103-9

"Community School Centers," Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1979.

Developing facilities for shared community services—schools, libraries, day care, recreation, etc. Finance, planning, design, reuse of surplus school space, managing.

EFL/AED
680 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10019
$6.00

"Rising Above Decline: Community Responses to Declining Enrollment," 1979.

Reports of six school districts closing schools and citizen action to influence

decisions. General lessons.
Institute for Responsive Education
704 Commonwealth Ave.
Boston, MA 02215
$4.50

"Surplus School Space: Options and Opportunities," Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1976.
$4.00

"The Secondary School: Reduction, Renewal, and Real Estate," Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1976.
$4.00

Parents Organizing to Improve Schools, National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1976.
Step-by-step guide to organizing and running parent groups in schools that can act effectively to upgrade the quality of education and get parents into the educational scene in a lasting way.
NCCE
410 Wilde Lake Village Green
Columbia, MD 21044
$3.50 plus $1.00 postage and handling

Declining Enrollment: What to Do, American Association of School Administrators, 1974.
A guide for school administators on how to deal with declining enrollment and school closings. This guide recommends methods for involving community residents in a supportive, advisory role.
AASA
1801 North Moore Street
Arlington, VA 22209
$2.50
#021-00428

Declining Enrollments: The challenge of the Coming Decade, National Institute of Education, 1978

A compendium of articles exploring different aspects of declining enrollment.

Superintendent of Documents
U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, DC 20402
$6.25
Stock No. 017-080-01832-2

Declining Enrollment—Closing Schools—Problems and Solutions, American Association of School Administrators, 1981

AASA
1801 North Moore Street
Arlington, VA 22209
$10.95
#021-00336

Open Meeting Laws—Freedom of Information

Note: Citizens have more rights than they know about to attend meetings of government organizations and examine public files and records to obtain information that would help them reach careful decisions. The organizations listed below have reports that will help you know about laws in your state.

Common Cause
2030 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036
Open Government in the States—State Open Meeting Laws

Each year Common Cause produces a report of statutes and regulations for each state about open meeting laws and freedom of information provisions. No charge.

Freedom of Information Center
University of Missouri
Box 858
Columbia, MO 65201
Phone: (614) 882-4856

The Freedom of Information Center is the only national research facility exclusively devoted to reporting and commenting on

actions of government, media and society affecting the flow of information. The Center receives many inquiries annually from individuals and groups seeking information on specific topics such as how to combat local censorship or restraints of access to public meetings and documents. The staff makes every effort to be of service at no charge or minimal fee, depending on the nature of the request.

U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, DC 20402
Freedom of Information: A Compilation of State Laws, U.S. Printing Office, 1978. $5.00

Additional copies of this handbook may be ordered from either Educational Facilities Laboratories or the National Committee for Citizens in Education. Send $3.50 for each copy plus $1.00 to cover postage and handling to:

Educational Facilities Laboratory
Academy for Educational Development
680 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10019

or

National Committee for Citizens in Education
410 Wilde Lake Village Green
Columbia, MD 21044

or call (301) 997-9300 to inquire about discounts on bulk orders.

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About the Publishers

The National Committee for Citizens in Education
410 Wilde Lake Village Green
Columbia, Maryland 21044

The National Committee for Citizens in Education and its subsidiary, the Parents' Network, are non-profit, independently funded services for parents and citizens working to improve public schools. Since 1973 the organization has worked to improve the climate for parent/citizen involvement nationally at the same time staff provided technical and information services to grassroots organizations of parents and citizens in the Parents' Network.

Currently over 300 local groups in 43 states take advantage of support services provided through the Parents' Network. Using "networking" to increase their power base, groups in several states have formed state-wide Parents' Network coalitions. NCCE also answers the questions of literally thousands of individual parents a year about their rights to participate in their child's public school experience.

Services offered by the Parents' Network and NCCE include toll-free information, 800-NET-WORK; handbooks on school violence, fund raising, organizing, leadership, school budgets, collective bargaining, public school power structure, the rights of parents, and testing; a tabloid newspaper; wallet-size references on parents' rights and children's school year progress; film and handbook combination training packages; selected materials in Spanish; casework for group and individual members; information clearing-house and referral; a presence in Washington representing parents and citizens and a continuous monitoring of parent participation aspects of federal law; and visible, articulate spokespersons for parents and citizens in the media.